Voltaire - 3rd and last appearance

Brother Pánfilo moved away, and Fray Placido raised his hand to his forehead to make the sign of the cross, when he was stopped by an Ouch! and the creaking of bony knees, which he had already heard twice before with horror.

—I promised you to return once more, and today I keep my promise! Voltaire told him.

—Beware of making that sign, which I mocked when I was alive and which now brings me to my knees, along with the angels and demons.
The figure of the Patriarch of Ferney was more gloomy and more sinister. He came wrapped in a blanket that seemed to be made of a flameless fire, but which clung to his flesh, and from which he could not part, as if more than the fire he was terrified by the cold or the nakedness.

—I have so shamelessly stripped human beings naked in my works that today my punishment is to horribly suffer the modesty I taught them to despise...
Friar Placido, not knowing what to say, replied:

—I was no longer expecting you. So many years have passed!
Voltaire laughed with a painful and sarcastic laugh:

—Do they seem like so many years to you? Ten, twenty, thirty! Thirty years ago, men celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of my hell. To you, the living, thirty years seem like a long time. To us, in eternity, they seem no longer than the blink of an eye, because neither thirty, nor a hundred, nor a thousand, mean anything, nothing, nothing. And yet, a single minute is intolerable and would seem eternal to us, if we did not constantly have the vision of the eternity before us.

—Unforgivable wretch! exclaimed Friar Placido, pityingly.
And Voltaire laughed again:

—Do you pity me?

—Yes, and I'm going to ask you again what I already asked you: if they gave you a minute to repent, would you take advantage of it?

—Even if they gave me my freedom back, I would not be free.

Have you ever seen the catalog of my works? The list alone, in all languages, takes up entire volumes. Could you calculate the millions and millions of readers they've had; the millions and millions of blasphemies they've inspired; the millions of souls who, because of them, lost their faith and have been damned? I am a prisoner of my books and of the souls I've cast into hell.

—Do they know you, do they persecute you?

—Ah, if only I could be free of them! Have you ever seen a pack of hungry dogs when their master enters the enclosure where he keeps them? They pounce on him and harass him, howling for some food to satisfy the hunger that devours them. So they, those who in the world admired me, run like a whirlwind after me, demanding a relief I cannot give them, and repaying me with insults for the praise they once heaped on me. And I, like a coward who paints his face to hide his pallor, laugh and mock them, to hide the terror I feel of them.

—Now I understand that they would not let you repent, if you could...
—If I had a minute to repent, supposing my pride would allow me to exclaim: Forgive me, Lord: I who blasphemed your name, I confess and humble myself! Supposing I were capable of a supernatural act, more portentous than raising a dead person, those souls who were lost because of me would not allow me to be saved... I, who was their teacher, am now their prisoner...
—You have done much evil to others, but you have done more to yourself.
—Indeed, I am the father of liberalism, which, in turn, engendered atheism and then Satanism and the cult of blasphemy... Can you imagine that I could kneel before the Infamous One and abandon the millions who follow me and recognize me as their spiritual lord?
—But the torments you suffer...?

—They are unspeakable, but they will never change my rebellious will.
A stubborn and unrepentant soul is harder than a diamond mountain range. In the midst of the flames, I will not kneel and will continue to say,
eternally, like the devil: *Non serviam*! It is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven.

—You told me well, the friar observed sadly, the first time you visited me, that the Lamb never signs a sentence of reprobation.

—No, never! It is the reprobate who signs it, and voluntarily damns himself. The Infamous One will sign only one sentence, and it is that of the greatest enemy of his name...

—The Antichrist... Has he appeared yet?

—Yes, he has already begun to reign over the world, with a sacrilege that would have horrified me at Ferney, I who so often, to deceive my servants or out of mockery, took communion in sin!

—Has the sixth seal been broken, then?

—Yes, and the earth has been unable to remain on its axis. It has righted itself on its ecliptic by 23 and a half degrees and has stopped rotating around its axis. Now days and nights last a full year, and the men who remain live in the bowels of the earth, which is porous like a sponge and crisscrossed by streams of water.

—And the pope and the Church, where are they?
—At the very moment that the wicked man received communion from a Catholic priest, in the antipodes of the earth, the Emperor Otto had the Pope assassinated, along with half the cardinals who fell into his hands. The others fled to the Holy Land...

—And Rome was destroyed?
—All of Europe was destroyed when that priest who gave communion to the Antichrist fell like a star from heaven into the abyss of apostasy. Don't ask me his name!
—I don't want to know! Your tongue is a liar, and it will tell lies.
—Today, Voltaire replied, I must tell the truth, by God's command.
—But today the truth does not burn my tongue, because I only proclaim evils.
—What other evils?

—When that star fell, like a burning torch in the sea...

—That is foretold with these words: *Et cecidit de coelo stella magna, ardens tanquam facula*.

—You know your Bible well, old friar! Voltaire replied with a horrible grimace that was meant to be a smile. For when the star fell and the earth's movement around its axis stopped, the seas and continents changed places; the waters of a third of the rivers became brackish, and entire populations died of thirst.

—Just as prophesied, said the friar.

—Otto and his empire have been buried beneath the Mediterranean, like Pharaoh and his army beneath the Red Sea. Spain and all of Central Europe have disappeared. Only the empire of Satania remains, until the Antichrist takes control of it. Already half of its inhabitants have their foreheads marked with his number.

— If Rome has been destroyed, Friar Placido asked, where will the Church take refuge?

—You know better than I do, because you believe in the prophecies I mocked.

—You couldn't believe in anything holy! Prophecies, says Saint Paul, are not for the infidels, but for the faithful. As for the prophecy that announces what the refuge of the Church will be, it is in Zechariah, and it says thus: The Lord will choose Jerusalem again (*Et elegit adhuc Jerusalem*). Now tell me what new pope we have...

—The cardinals gathered in Jerusalem, Voltaire replied, and elected Clement XV...

—Flor Florum... Friar Placidus indicated, recalling the motto assigned to him by the prophecy of Saint Malachy, Flower of flowers...

—He lived up to the motto, for he lived less than a flower.

—He had been elected to rule the people with a rod of iron, but he was assassinated a few days later. The College of Cardinals has gathered in a desert to elect a successor, ignoring the antipope, whom a council of apostates has chosen at the behest of the Antichrist...

—What is the name of that antipope?

—You told me you didn't want to know his name...

—Ah! Is that him? asked Friar Placido, feeling a surge of blood in his old heart.

—Yes, it is the one who one day, thirty years ago, was ordained and I announced to you that he would be a star called Wormwood. His pontifical name is Simon I.

—Simon of Samaria! exclaimed Friar Placido in pain, and added the anguished imprecation of Isaiah: How did you fall from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning? You who said in your heart: I will ascend to heaven among the stars... When Voltaire said nothing, he questioned him:

—What has precipitated him into apostasy? Greed?

—No!

—Perhaps sensuality?

—Nor!.

—Pride?

—Yes, pride, which is the root of all great apostasies. When a friar becomes obsessed with reforming the discipline of the Church, or claims to possess the key to the Scriptures, if he is not very humble, he is lost. He never fails to find followers who applaud him. Conceit begins, then obstinacy, then rebellion and apostasy... The other sins follow.

—Will my superior fall into them?

—I don't know. A rebellious priest can remain chaste and sober for years, seemingly fulfilling his ministry until one day he slackens on all sides, like a ship that has run aground...

—That woman who called herself Joan of Tabor, was she converted, by chance, or did she follow him in his madness?

—That woman is Jezebel, the prophetess of the Antichrist, who prepared his paths, sometimes feigning love, other times the desire to convert...

—It's almost always like that, the friar murmured. The unfortunate heresiarchs end up being the plaything of some prophetess, who instills in them the most subtle and diabolical of temptations: the desire to convert them out of love. With this they intend to deceive God, but, as the holy text says:

—Does God need your lies?

Hearing this, Voltaire writhed in pain and uttered a biblical phrase in Latin: ***Mentita est iniquitas sibi***. (Iniquity has deceived itself.) And he added with extreme bitterness:

—If you understood how much I suffer when I pronounce this text, which could be written on the pedestal of all my statues...

—Lying to oneself is a form of obstinacy and pride, the friar commented. But tell me, what relief do you feel when you speak?

—Can I perhaps speak of relief when I follow my present nature? But it is certain that not following it would be more unbearable to me within the unbearable. I am and will be eternally like a burning stone or a meteor. The infernal wind that whizzes in my ears when I travel through infinite spaces gives me no relief, but I would writhe in torture if I stopped. Even visiting you, by God's command, causes me horror.

—Why?

—Because for me, an unhappy inhabitant of eternity, it puts me in touch with the time I perversely and stupidly let slip by. A single second, just one, I would now like of the 2,429,913,600 ( ) that I had at my disposal from the moment I came to reason until the moment I died...

—Why do you mention the number?

—Because at every instant, like a miser counting his coins, I count that treasure of seconds that I squandered with wretched prodigality. With just one, I would have had enough to change the course of my eternity.

Saying this, the shadow uttered a long moan that penetrated the friar's marrow like a biting, icy acid.

—Don't moan like that; it causes me a terrible pain... Can I do anything for you?

Voltaire was silent for a moment, and then said.

—Epulon, from hell, cried out for his brothers to hear him. My condition is incomparably worse, due to the nature of my sins, which were primarily sins against the Spirit. I cannot wish any good to anyone, only evil.

There is only one hope for me, which is a contradiction of my nature.

—What is it?

—Since my sorrow grows with each soul lost through my fault,

I have only one hope: that the order of the Antichrist will be carried out, who has ordered all the libraries of his empire to be destroyed, just as Herod ordered all the children to be killed, out of hatred for a single one. The Antichrist wants to destroy the Scriptures and all the letters of them that are in the books...

—Your books will perish, but your doctrine will live and will continue to dry up at its sources the living water of Christian baptism.

Voltaire was about to explain that contradiction that made him wish, in his hatred of Christ, that the world would continue to deny Him, and at the same time fear that the number of souls lost to his books would increase.

But something must have happened on the other side of the world, of which he received instant notice, for he flinched and remained silent for a few minutes; then he said:

—At this moment, the last of the living who was missing has been marked with the number of the Antichrist. There remains only those marked with the sign of the Lamb, who will not transgress. The persecutions are about to begin until the great battle... What will happen then?

—The Son of Man will come and kill with the breath of his mouth the Man of Perdition, and from that moment on in hell there will be those who will envy my tortures, because they will be immensely less than theirs...

—That in your eternal abode... and in the world, where there is still time?

—There will be no more time. The Infamous One will appear in the clouds, and all of you, who for your good fortune will have persevered, will rise into the air to meet the Son of Man, and the world will enter the splendors of the Kingdom of God... Woe is me, for I already have eternity in my veins, and not a single minute of those that you mortals despise like grains of dust! All my glory for a grain of that golden dust that is time!

With this, his most painful figure disappeared, and Brother Placido was left wondering if he had dreamed that for the third time